

Navy practices detecting enemy subs

Quiet diesel vessels owned by China seen as threat

By Audry McAvoy, Associated Press, (Seattle Post Intelligencer), 27 Jan 06

ABOARD THE USS RONALD REAGAN -- Two Navy destroyers and a cruiser dangle sonar devices into the ocean to listen for enemy submarines lurking 50 miles from Honolulu. Naval aviators in P-3 surveillance planes and helicopters drop sonar buoys into the sea to give the sailors more ears below the surface.

The submarines are not really enemy vessels, but U.S. subs participating in anti-submarine warfare training. The exercises, held Jan. 9-12, are something Navy sailors will be doing more of in coming years. The Pacific Fleet has made training to track and destroy submarines its top combat priority amid concerns its sailors' skills have not kept up with the advanced diesel submarines China and other Pacific Rim countries have been buying.

"There is a real threat out there -- over 140 diesel submarines in the Pacific, and the technology on them is getting better every day," said Capt. David Steindl, who directed the ships and aircraft during the exercises. "We need to train constantly to be ready if we ever have to face that threat."

Tracking submarines dropped on the Navy's list of priorities after the Cold War ended and the former Soviet Union began retiring some of its undersea vessels. Also, diesel submarines were considered too loud to pose much of a threat to the U.S. Navy and its silent-running nuclear subs.

But the emergence of quieter diesel subs has given anti-submarine warfare new urgency. These diesel submarines are no challenge to the U.S. Navy's supremacy at sea; they can't go fast enough for long enough distances for that. But they are quieter and thus harder to find and more capable of sneaking up on ships.

Owen Cote, associate director of the security studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said the United States is primarily concerned that China might use its diesel subs to block commercial ship access to Taiwan and force Taiwan to capitulate in a military showdown with Beijing.